

Reviews

ARGULA VON GRUMBACH: A WOMAN'S VOICE IN THE REFORMATION translated and edited by Peter Matheson. *T&T Clark, Edinburgh* 1995. pp. ix & 213. £19.95.

In 1523 the University of Ingolstadt forced a young Luther-influenced Master of Arts, Arsacius Seehofer, to sign a repudiation of seventeen articles of "heresy" he admitted to having taught, at the threat of being burned at the stake. Weeping copiously, in the presence of the assembled university community, he recanted with his hand on the Bible.

Argula von Grumbach's short career as a best-selling Reformation pamphleteer was set in motion by her sense of outrage at this event. As a noblewoman belonging by birth to a ruling Bavarian baronial family, the von Stauffs, she wrote in the strongest terms to the University, upbraiding its Council for their cowardice in looking to triumph over Lutheran theology by browbeating an eighteen-year-old, rather than address its claims in proper debate. "A disputation is easily won when one argues with force, not Scripture. As far as I can see that means the hangman is accounted the most learned."

Von Grumbach's is a fascinating voice, the kind social historians give their eye teeth for. It does double duty, as that of a "minor great" (which surely, with her strength of rhetoric and her integrity, she must be considered), and as that of a "punter", a layperson in every sense, which represents the hearts and minds which would be crucial to the success or otherwise of the Reformers. This collection gives us her eight published pamphlets: the letter to the University and a series of subsequent letters to other public figures, justifying or defending her conduct in the light of the furore which quickly arose. Peter Matheson, who accidentally came across these on a library microfiche, has translated them from the German manuscripts, and provided a full and eminently satisfactory biography, bibliography and introduction. He is impressively humble in his delight at introducing the English-speaking world to such a find.

From both her conscious loyalties and unconscious prejudices von Grumbach argues with force and penetration, with enlightening results. As a noblewoman, she unconsciously defends and forgives the German princes many of the same things for which she arraigns the clerics:

"My heart goes out to our princes, whom you have seduced and betrayed so deplorably. For I realise that they are ill informed about divine Scripture. If they could spare the time from other business, I believe they, too, would discover the truth that no one has a right to exercise sovereignty over the word of God."

As a theologian, she is often naive. Her staple is scriptural quotation applied liberally to her own situation and that of the Reformers; the University are treated to the tirades of the classical Prophets, and

branded "blind Pharisees" who make up laws without God's command. Law and philosophy are her twin pet hates: "Philosophy can avail nothing. As Paul says to the Colossians, 'Be careful of philosophy and the lofty speech of those who are wise in the things of the world.'" The Decretals are the object of her particular obsession: "The word of God... is a treasury of salvation, not a pit for cash like the Decretals"; "You would be much readier to suffer God's word if you did not profit from the publication of the Decretal.... I have seen how my dear lord and father of blessed memory had to pay twenty gulden for a piece of advice four lines long; not that it did him a cent of good."

It is as a woman theologian that she is perhaps most interesting, and her self-presentation prefigures much of the approach of the present century. She is considerably occupied with addressing the 1 Timothy 2 text which seems to forbid women to speak on matters of theology. Her response is to cite the women prophets and heroines of the Old Testament, and texts such as Luke 10 ("Father, you have hidden these things from the wise"), Joel ("I will pour out my spirit on all flesh"), and above all Matthew 10 ("Whoever denies me before people, I will also deny before my Father"), which she sees as an absolute command to all to speak up when the Gospel is seen to be persecuted.

As Matheson points out, her withdrawal from the public scene is as interesting as her entry onto it. Her impassioned intervention failed to convince the Bavarian princes to withdraw their support from the University, and she was punished by the dismissal of her husband from public office. Her eight pamphlets cover the space of only one year, the whole extent of her publishing career, although Luther is still writing in 1528 to Spelatin of "what this most pious woman has to put up with and suffer." She was ultimately, for all her nobility and intelligence, and for all the popularity of her pamphlets, not taken seriously. The sole response the University gave her was a vicious and crude satirical poem, which sneers "Go back to your spindle", "Perhaps Arsacius excites your vagina" and ends: "If for this topic again you head/ Like all your heretic friends, you're dead." Von Grumbach printed this, with a gracious response, still trying to invite the University to a reasonable debate. But this was the only reply she was ever to receive from them.

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CONFIRMATION, SACRAMENT OF GRACE: The Theology, Practice and Law of the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England by James Behrens, *Gracewing, Fowler Wright Books, Leominster, 1995. Pb xvii + 115 pp. £7.99.*

What can only be described as a renaissance of canon law is taking place in the Church of England. The Ecclesiastical Law Society, already with a large membership and its influential *Ecclesiastical Law Journal*, was established in 1987, publishers are showing an increasing willingness to accept books on ecclesiastical law, and Cardiff University now offers an